GOD, CREATION AND GRATITUDE
Luke 17:11-19
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Parents do not ordinarily trust a child's instinct for gratitude to express itself appropriately. Rather, we insist, almost from the beginning, that children say "thank you" whether or not they happen to be feeling gratitude.

Shakespeare called ingratitude "thou marble-hearted fiend" and has King Lear observe - for all parents - "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child."
(King Lear, Act I, Scene 4).

And so, one of the formative influences in life, for most of us, was the ritual, at least, of thankfulness. We were taught to say it first and think about it later and, I confess, not only did it not hurt us, but the ritualized saying our gratitude became a way for the feeling to register also.

At meal time, simple unsophisticated prayers will do the same thing. "God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for this food." Even repeated without variation, I would submit, the simple act of expressing gratitude becomes the way one opens oneself to the feeling of gratitude.

Why bother? Why all the ceremony? Why not the route of painful honesty, reserving "thank yous" for just those persons to whom we feel genuinely grateful? Why not just tell it like it is, or stop telling it is like it's not and thanking God for something for which we are less than overwhelmingly grateful?

Because we are never more fully human than when we are grateful: because William Law was correct when he suggested that the surest way to happiness was to turn misfortune into a blessing by thanking God for it...: because gratitude is at the heart of our ability to relate with one another and to live productively on the earth. George Arthur Buttrick said it poetically: "Praise is native, and men give thanks for the same reason that birds sing. Praise is man's instinctive response to the creative love of God, the river's flowing to the sea." (Interpreter's Bible, vol. 8, p.299). Well, maybe. My parents decided not to take chances on instinct, however - and to teach something about humanness by insisting on gratitude.

That is the point of vignette in Luke's Gospel which we heard a few minutes ago. The story is simple and to the point. Jesus and company were between Samaria and Galilee, near the border. At the outskirts of a village they encountered what would have been a common sight - a small group of lepers. Law and custom required that people with the disease be isolated from the rest of society. They lived outside the towns: they often banded together. They were dependent on the generosity of passers-by for money. There were no more miserable people in the ancient world. Those who did not die of whatever disease they had - and any skin problem could be called leprosy - died of exposure, starvation, or went mad. From a distance, therefore, they called to Him - "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." I'm inclined to think that all they wanted was a few shekels. In any event, He instructed them to go to a priest. Only a priest could determine that a person had leprosy and was unclean. Only a priest could verify that he was healed, clean, fit for human relationship. I'm intrigued by the way Luke tells this story. He doesn't in this case, say that Jesus laid hands on them: in fact, he doesn't say that Jesus healed them; only that they asked for mercy; He sent them to a priest, and that by the time they got there they were "cleansed" The point comes next. One of them took the time to find Jesus again and thank him; the one, in fact, who was a Samaritan. Jesus asked the rhetorical questions: "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?

That doesn't require much interpretation. Ten men were given the incredible gift of life. One was grateful: nine were not. One took the time to express his gratitude - to say "thank you". Nine did not, regardless of what they were feeling. But that's not the end of the story. The surprising part comes next, in what Jesus said to the man. "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." What about the other nine? Weren't they healed also? Wasn't their healing, their wholeness as complete? The answer, obviously, is "no". They were not healed - not totally. Wholeness - health - includes the feeling and expression of gratitude. Nine men, in neglecting to say "thank you", had not really been made whole. They had not received fully, the gift Jesus wanted to give them. The one man, the Samaritan, the grateful one, got his full humanity back. In gratitude - he became whole.

That is why the ritual of saying "thank you" preceeds sometimes, the feeling of gratitude and becomes a channel for that gratitude. And that is why we set aside a day for the particular expression of a feeling we ought to have every day.

It seems to me that we need that reminder this year in particular. I sense that many of us are uneasy this time around. The cornucopia does not seem to be as bottomless as before. Our dependence on a finite source of energy owned by people who are not longer friendly is on our minds constantly. We are profoundly worried about the hostages in Iran and a brand of hatred for us that we simply cannot comprehend. In the background we hear the cries of boat people, and the ghastly specter of Cambodia, the unspeakable fact that during the time we are together this morning more than two hundred Cambodians will die - mostly children - of starvation. It is not an easy Thanksgiving.

As a matter of fact Thanksgiving has always made thoughtful people uneasy. A generation ago, Reinhold Niebuhr, who became one of the most important theologians of our era, was a young city pastor in Detroit. After sitting through a Union Thanksgiving Service he wrote a scathing analysis of the way the observance can become the vehicle of self-congratulation. He wondered "if it is really possible to have an honest Thanksgiving celebration in an industrial civilization". A Harvest Festival, when the community heaves a corporate sigh of relief because "all is safely gathered in" and life is secure till Spring, is one thing - Niebuhr thought that in an industrial situation, when wealth is piled up by the ingenuity of the machine, Thanksgiving becomes the "business of congratulating God on His most excellent co-workers, ourselves". (Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, p.173).

But beyond the fact that most of us are several times removed from the actual planting, growing and harvesting of food, the deeper discomfort we feel at Thanksgiving has to do with the question of God's relationship with the world. In fact, it has to do with the question of God itself. Has He blessed us? Is our affluence evidence of His special blessing? Does the fact that Cambodians are starving indicate that He has not blessed them or doesn't care about them?

Theologically, we do not propose nor believe that God blesses with His favor one group or one nation over another. Nor that He gives one person health and another cancer. What we do propose is that God has given life and the world and human intelligence, and that when all conspire with simple good fortune to make life pleasant and beautiful, God should be thanked, because our humanity depends on it.

Hans Kung, a very articulate theologian, said that simply but eloquently: "for health, food, drink, so many joys: for progress in science and technology: for not breaking a leg while skiing, for colleagues who were not dishonest, for friendship which has endured...I would like to give thanks...to whom? As a believer, I would like to thank Him who stands behind chance." (Signposts for the Future, p.163).

The problem for thoughtful people at Thanksgiving is to be grateful for what we have - but to push beyond that to.... the simple givenness of life itself. William Sloane Coffin, in his autobiography recalls his early struggle with the fundamental theological question: the existence of God. He remembers a particularly poignant incident when a friend had been killed in an automobile accident and he sat in the Chapel at Union Seminary for the funeral. He writes: "My friend's death seemed to be one more bit of evidence to prove the fatuousness of believing in an all-powerful, all-loving God when, as any sensitive person could see, the entire surface of the earth was soaked with the tears and the blood of the innocent. Maliciously, I had noted outside that the priest had a typically soft face over his hard collar. Now as he started down the aisle toward the altar he began to intone unctuously Job's famous words: 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' From the aisle seat where I was sitting I could have struck out my foot and tripped him up, and might easily have done so, had my attention not been arrested by a still, small voice, as it were, asking, 'Coffin, what part of that sentence are you objecting to?' Naturally I thought it was the second part, 'the Lord hath taken away', spoken all too facilely by the priest. But suddenly I realized it was the first. Suddenly I caught the full impact of 'The Lord gave'. The world very simply is not ours, at best we're guests. It was not an understanding I relished nor one, certainly, to clear up all my objections to my friend's death. But as I sat quietly now at his funeral, I realized that it was probably the understanding against which all the spears of human pride had to be hurled and shattered." (Once to Every Man, p.83).

That was an important milestone for Coffin. In a sense it is a hurdle for every one of us. We must encounter the fact of evil and the faith that God does not will nor cause it, and work through that hard theological pilgrimage which no longer blames God for it, but understands that He has made Himself vulnerable to it, that He shares it with us, stands under suffering beside us, weeps with us, and loves us so strongly that we triumph over all - even death itself. Each of us must face the deeper assault on our pride that all of life is a gift, that we don't own much and deserve less, that at best we are guests on the earth and in life - and that something of the fullness of our humanity depends on our knowing it. Thanksgiving precipitates all of that. It also forces the fundamental issue to the surface. Do we believe in God, or chance, or both? Do we affirm a universe which is empty, neutral, without direction, or a universe guided by a power, a reality which works for good? Again, Hans Kung puts the issue nicely: "Everyone believes in something...After many experiences of recent, very recent history, I prefer to believe in God: as a wholly rational human being I think, to believe in God." (op.cit. p.60).

We are the heirs, after all, of a great, great deal. No one of us called ourselves into being. Rather we were loved into existence by a man and a woman and God. We were born in grace and we lived - for a very long time, totally hopeless, totally dependent on someone else. No other creature in creation is as helpless for as long. Someone had to feed us, clothe us, bathe us, teach us to walk and talk. If our gratitude can find no other pole, surely it must confront this basic gift of our lives.

We receive the heritage of the nation: a system which works and which we did not create. We receive a church and a faith, passed down from one generation to the next by people who sacrificed and worked for the simple satisfaction of having something to give us in our day.

We receive the gift of other people, each one given to us as a special gift. What a difference it would make if we could begin to see them all in this way: as God's gift to us. What a profound difference in our marriages and families and intimate relationships if we could learn to be grateful; to replace expectation with thanksgiving; to say "thank you" for that cup of coffee, that pay check, for looking so nice for me.

Seward Hiltner, Professor at Princeton Seminary, wrote that the sixties and seventies were characterized in American life by a general moratorium on gratitude. Suddenly it became stylish and expected to demand one's own space, the right to do one's own thing. Suddenly it became unfashionable and weak to be thankful for anything.

We Christians bring an added perspective to the Festival of Thanksgiving. We know our God as a God of grace. We know the good news that His love for us is consistent, that in good days and bad days He has promised to be with us, that in sickness and health, life and death, His love for us is unending.

One of the greatest humns of the church, "Now Thank We All Our God" says that eloquently. We will sing that hymn at the end of the service. Listen to the second stanza:

"O may this bounteous God, through all our life be near us
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed
And free us from all ills, in this world and the next."

I love that hymn. Robert McAfee Brown said somewhere that it is the all-purpose Protestant hymn, suitable for every conceivable situation: baptism, wedding, funeral, whatever. I agree. I love the hymn particularly because of the man who wrote it and the situation in which it was written.

Martin Rinkart was his name. He was not sitting in front of a roaring fire, after dinner, surrounded by his loving family when he wrote it. He was a Bishop in the German church; the year was 1636. That date is in the middle of what we know as the Thirty Years War. Rinkart's village had become a haven for refugees and fugitives and defeated soldiers. Quickly the village became overcrowded, unsanitary and unhealthy. People got hungry and sick and before long the plague broke out. As the plague took its toll, Rinkart discovered that he was the only clergyman in the village. During one period Martin Rinkart was reading burial rites for fifty people per day. In all he buried 4,500 people, including his wife. He wrote his hymn, not for the cathedral - but for a grace, to be sung at his own table. And he wrote out of the worst kind of suffering and tragedy.

That is the Christian secret: not just when the larder is full, but "Through all our life" He will be with us.

The custom began with a few brave and lonely Pilgrims perched precariously on the edge of the new world, sure of nothing - except God's presence, God's love and God's faithfulness. It continued with Abraham Lincoln, watching war and hatred tear apart the nation; sure of nothing but God.

So today, it continues. There is much about which to be concerned. The unpardonable sin would be to celebrate the feast without acknowledging the kind of world in which we are living - to use the celebration as a distraction from the pain of knowing about starvation. That is wrong. But it also wrong to despair, or to feel guilty because we happen to have enough, or to neglect gratitude, or to fail to see the beauty all around us. That, too, is unpardonable. We have been given everything. The fullness of our humanity depends on our confessing that fact and thanking God for it. The good news is that God will be faithful, that He will love us and be with us.

"Now Thank We All Our God."

Amen.

Father and God, You are the giver of every good and perfect gift. Be at our tables: be in our midst. Be near when we are alone: make us sensitive to the needs of others: and make our celebrating holy with Your presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.